

UT Gardens Plant of the Month

Winterberry Holly Blazes in Color Across its Namesake Months

Submitted by Shalena Durkot, Garden Coordinator, UT Gardens, Crossville



It is hard to miss the display of a winterberry holly during the year's coldest months. This 'Winter Red' cultivar provides showy color at the University of Tennessee Gardens, Jackson. Photo courtesy of Jason Reeves.

As the beautiful fall-colored leaves drop and we transition into winter, winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*) is sure to catch your eye. The berries are especially prominent when the holly is planted in front of evergreens. Unlike most hollies, winterberry holly is deciduous which adds to the "berry" pleasing display on its bare branches during the plant's namesake winter months. While red berry varieties of the holly tend to be most popular, there are gold and orange cultivars, as well.

Ilex verticillata is native to eastern North America (USDA plant hardiness zones 3 to 9) where it typically occurs in wetlands or along lakes and stream banks. The shrub is slow growing and may reach up to 15 feet in the wild but tend to be smaller in the home landscape. Though commonly found in wet areas, winterberry holly is easily grown in average, well-drained, acidic soils with adequate moisture. Generally, the shrubs are pest and disease free, but they can be susceptible to leaf spots and powdery mildew. They may readily sucker to form a colony in wet sites and remain in a tighter clump with drier

soils. Winterberry holly will grow in part shade, however, their best fruit production occurs in full sun at sites that receive six or more hours of sunlight a day.

The shrub has elliptical, toothed leaves that are two to three inches long, and it develops inconspicuous, greenish-white flowers in late spring. Most importantly, *Ilex verticillata* is dioecious, meaning that some plants are male and some female. To enjoy the bountiful berries for which this plant is cherished, you must plant both male and female plants in your landscape. One male plant can pollinate five to 10 females and should be planted within 40 to 50 feet. It is also important to match bloom times when selecting a male pollinator. Some bloom earlier than others, and the more overlap you can achieve, the better the berry production will be.

Winterberry holly is quite versatile in the landscape. As mentioned earlier, the plant is stunning with an evergreen backdrop. Shrubs can also be used as hedges, borders, foundation plantings, native gardens, rain gardens, and for wildlife. *Ilex verticillata* attracts many species of songbirds, as well as butterflies and beneficial insects, including bees and other pollinators. The berries make a wonderful addition to holiday arrangements. In fact, December is a good time to do any needed pruning, or otherwise, wait until late winter and prune before new growth appears.

You can see winterberry hollies in person growing at all three locations of the University of Tennessee Gardens. Popular winterberry holly cultivars with their recommended pollinators include:

- 'Winter Red' grows 6 to 8 feet tall, multi-stemmed, abundance of red berries.
- Pollinator, 'Southern Gentleman' grows 6 to 8 feet tall.
- 'Winter Gold' grows 5 to 8 feet tall, dense, heavy fruiting orange-yellow berries.
- Pollinator, 'Southern Gentleman' grows 6 to 8 feet tall.
- 'Nana' (Red Sprite) dwarf cultivar grows to 3 feet, bright red berries.
- Pollinator, 'Jim Dandy' grows 3 to 6 feet.
- 'Berry Poppins' dwarf cultivar grows 3 to 4 feet, display of red berries.
- Pollinator, 'Mr. Poppins' grows 3 to 4 feet.
- 'Berry Heavy' grows 6 to 8 feet, bright red berries.
- Pollinator, 'Mr. Poppins' grows 3 to 4 feet.
- 'Berry Heavy Gold' grows 6 to 8 feet, big, bright gold fruit.
- Pollinator, 'Mr. Poppins' grows 3 to 4 feet.



Gardening Tips

“Gardening requires lots of water - most of it in the form of perspiration.”

Lou Erickson

December Tips

Gardeners garden all year long, even during the holidays! Here are some tips from Jason Reeves, horticulturist at the UT Gardens, Jackson, to keep your garden fit as the year wanes.

- If you think Christmas lights are the only way to brighten up your outdoor winter scene, you haven't met some of our favorite plants. You will get natural holiday decorations for your landscape as well as a lot of excitement and winter interest from plants like possumhaw (*Ilex decidua*) and winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*), and redbud dogwood. In addition, Arizona cypress and 'Grey Owl' Juniper are beautiful blue conifers, and their golden "cousins" are attractive, too, for example, *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Crippsii', 'Fernspray Gold' and 'Vintage Gold'.
- Small hollies, conifers, twisted willow, and redbud dogwoods make a great addition to winter pots and can be added to the garden come spring.
- Check out the sale racks at your local garden center for bulbs that have been reduced in price. If they feel firm and are not moldy, they should still be good. Plant them as soon as possible, though. There is still time for them to get the winter chilling they need, but time is of the essence.
- Winter officially begins December 21. Winter is a good time to lime your soil if it is acidic. Your local county extension office can provide you with instructions on how to gather soil samples and send them off for analysis. They will analyze your sample and send recommendations for the amount of lime you need to apply to your lawn and garden. It takes months for lime to react with the soil; so by applying now, you will help bolster your spring garden. Pelletized lime is the easiest and least messy form to apply. Contact your local county UT Extension Office or visit the UT Soil, Pest, and Plant Center, online at ag.tennessee.edu/spp
- If you haven't already winterized your irrigation system, do so right away to avoid broken pipes and costly repairs.
- Don't forget to water your succulents. "Just because they like it on the dry side doesn't mean they don't need water. The lack of humidity in your home during the winter months can dry them out more than you think," said Reeves. "Depending on the pot size and the soil-to-plant ratio, I water mine every two to three weeks. I like to set them in the sink for the process. If they are really dry, you may need to water them twice because the first time you water them it may run through."
- If you have stored tropical plants for the winter, don't forget them, says the gardening expert. "Keep an eye on elephant ears, bananas, cannas, ginger, agaves, and Boston and Kimberly Queen ferns that you may have stored in an enclosed garage, basement, or crawl space under the house," said Reeves. "They don't need to totally dry out." On the other hand, Reeves adds that tropical can easily be overwatered, causing them to rot. He recommends removing rotting foliage to prevent further decay.
- Outdoors, Reeves says homeowners should continue to keep leaves off the lawn, especially cool-season lawns because they continue to photosynthesize during the winter. "On a dry, warmish day you can mow both cool- and warm-season lawns to help groom the lawn and mulch the leaves." However, the expert cautions to avoid heavy traffic on cool-season lawns during cold snaps when the grass is frozen. Frozen grass is easily broken, and the crown can be severely damaged, he says.
- Trees, especially evergreens, can also be prone to damage during wet winters. "In the event of a wet snow, brush snow off evergreens as it accumulates, or as soon as possible after the storm," Reeves said. "Serious damage can be caused by heavy wet snow," Reeves recommends using a broom in an upward, sweeping motion to encourage heavy snow to fall to the ground. He also recommends avoiding the use of salt to melt snow and ice from walks and driveways, as it can be harmful to plants. Environmentally friendly products are available at home improvement stores.
- For the diehard enthusiast, the expert says you can continue to plant new trees and shrubs as long as the ground is not frozen. "Just tuck them in with a 2- or 3-inch layer of mulch," he said. "Remember to keep the mulch away from the trunk, however."
- Reeves reminds gardeners that pansies will benefit if you pinch off their withered and cold-damaged blooms, and he encourages them to not lose faith if Old Man Winter is particularly harsh. "Study seed catalogs if the cold days of winter seem unrelenting," he said. "And dream of lush, warmer days."

Flu Season May Be More Severe This Year, Warns UT Extension Public Health Expert

Fewer Restrictions Resulting from the COVID-19 Pandemic May Mean Heightened Exposure to Flu



This year's flu season may be more severe than previous years, when COVID-19 precautions, closures and restrictions reduced the risk of flu as well. Image courtesy Unsplash.

After nearly three years of restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic stifled flu cases across the nation, University of Tennessee Extension health experts are warning Tennesseans that this year may be different.

“Flu season is expected to be more severe this year as we are already seeing cases of other respiratory viruses on the rise,” says Soghra Jarvandi, a UT Extension community health specialist and associate professor. “As more and more COVID-19 pandemic precautions are relaxed, such as masking and limiting indoor gatherings, more and more people will come in contact with the flu virus.”

Jarvandi adds that fewer people both got sick with the flu and were hospitalized with severe illness during the last few years as a result of the precautions and lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

These precautions decreased the number of people getting sick with

COVID-19 but also lowered risk of exposure for other respiratory diseases, like flu or RSV.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an average of 32 million Americans got sick with the flu from 2012-2020, including an average of 36,000 deaths from severe illness each year.

While anyone can become infected with the flu virus, some populations are at a higher risk of complications. Children younger than 5 years old, adults 65 and over, adults with chronic conditions, pregnant women, people with disabilities, people with HIV/AIDS, and people who have cancer are all at an elevated risk of severe illness.

Year after year, one of the easiest ways to protect yourself and others from flu is to get a flu vaccine at a nearby pharmacy. “Anyone six months of age or older should get an annual flu vaccine, with rare exception. Vaccination is especially important for people who are at high risk for serious complications from the flu,” adds Jarvandi.

Other steps of flu prevention include wearing a mask or isolating while you’re sick, washing your hands frequently, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle that includes nutritious foods like fruits and vegetables, adequate nightly sleep, and regular exercise.

More information about seasonal flu is available in the UT Extension publication “[FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SEASONAL FLU D 182](#).” Visit utextension.tennessee.edu and click on the publications tab to search.